

Street Lighting in Nantucket  
By Edouard Stackpole

It is interesting to note that Nantucket, as a community, was never a village as were most New England habitations in Colonial days. It was always a town from the beginnings, as when the first house-lots were laid out along the shores of the Great Harbor, called the Wesco Acre lots, the dwellings and shops and warehouses were all build close to each other. The streets led from the old settlement at the west to the new settlement also called Sherborn, and the principle ways came from the wharves of the waterfront. The major part of the Town of Nantucket consisted of three house lot divisions – the Wesco Lots, the Fish Lots and the West Monomy Lots.

During the night, people walking the streets and byways carried either a candle lanthorn or a oil-lighted one. Early in the history of the old town, a watchman made the rounds, with the number augmented as the population increased and the houses gradually spread throughout the confines of the house-lot divisions. With the development of the whaling industry the closely-knit town grew. However, the introduction of street lights was comparatively slower. Whale oil was too valuable a commodity to be wasted by burning it at night for lighting the streets for the citizens.

It must be remembered that London, the chief market place for Nantucket wale oil, had no more than 700 street lights in the entire limits of this city—the greatest in Europe. In 1763 a system of street lighting was introduced in London Known as “parish lamps,” and paid for by a tax collected. The practice grew; it was a great way to curb the crimes that were taking place in that city’s streets. By 1780 some 15,000 street lamps were being tended by the lamp-lighters. It was London’s boast that there were more street lamps along Oxford Row than in the entire city

of Paris! The street lamps were placed at regular intervals, and were now enclosed by glass.

Whale oil was illuminant, and a cotton twist was the wick. Sperm oil was used in private homes.

With the demand for oil by the London market, it was natural for the thrift Nantucketers to curtail any extravagance in bringing regular street lights to the town. Private enterprise, on the other hand, led to the first “out-door” lamps, which were placed by the door posts of the dwellings of certain wealthy citizens. It is probable that Liberty, India, Orange and Union Streets were the first to boast these lamps by the doorways of the ship-owners and whaling merchants. The style of light was similar to those found in London. It will be remembered that Boston and Philadelphia were the first American cities to adopt the London methods. John Hancock, in 1772, was the promoter of street lighting in Boston, and he proposed a globe of glass. It was Benjamin Franklin, who earlier had proposed a triangular glass cover for the street lamps in Philadelphia, demonstrating that the lanthorn, if completely closed would cause smoke and soot and obscure the light.

The tallow candle was undoubtedly first used by the Nantucket families, with mutton and hog fat for the ingredients. When visiting at night the lantern guided the way along the gootpaths, and then, in the won, along the streets. When whaled oil came into used, the lanterns were improved, and the tinsmith was employed for lampmaking as well as for lanterns. Some of the early types had horn instead of glass, which served the owners well through the years. In September, 1748, the town voted to establish the night watch from 8 o'clock in the evening until the “break of day.” As the watchmen carried lanterns, we are now aware of the official night use of whale oil for lighting. It is highly probable that individuals hung lights in front of their homes when expecting visitors at night, but just what type used must have been a personal

choice. Hogarth, in London, drew sketches of street lights, showing tin sections as well as glass. Boston had street lights for the first time in 1773.

It is most likely that no regular street lighting in Nantucket was ever adopted until the advent of the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The records of the town are singularly free of any references to such a use, but it is logical to recognize that some means of providing light along the thoroughfares must have been in existence. It is also likely that the commercial connections with other sea ports brought about the adoption of posts of a standard size for this use.

In voyages to London the Nantucketers reported the advances made in street lighting in the great metropolis. The first use of manufactured gas for lighting was introduced in London, with American cities following this example. In Nantucket gas was manufactured for the first time in 1854, and the stores on Main Street began installing gas fixtures soon after. The iron standards for street lights were next to be introduced. This cast iron post had a crossarm under the lamp holder for the ladder of the attendant who took care of the glass-enclosed burner. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1854, the Main Street Square was lighted with gas for the first time.

The average iron standard was about 10 ft. high, and the design was usually a fluted column, tapered, with acanthus leaves and a cross arm under the lantern. In 1967, the late Errol Coffin a well know architect who retired to live in Nantucket, made an interesting study of street lighting posts and bracketed gas lanterns, and included a number of drawings for his important essay.

With the introduction of electric light in the Town during the late 1880's (the first places lighted were the hotels and the Frist Congregational Church on August 17, 1889), it was a natural step for the Town to adopt the more convenient form of street lighting. In 1893 most of the gas lamps were lighted for the last time along the streets, and the new electric light supplanted the

old illuminant. However, it was a number of years before the old iron lamp standards were replaced by wooden poles, especially on some of the side streets. A line of poles had been extended to Surfside for the Surfside Hotel, but the land boom in that section of the island had faded away, and the line was discontinued in 1895.

In 1906, the property of the Gas & Electric Company was sold at auction for \$26,000, and a group of Nantucket citizens took over the control. A new series of street lights was introduced in 1912, using an arc-light, with carbon rods. These increased the illuminating power of the lamps. Main Street Square was the first section to use the new style, and then the other streets of the Town had these installed at certain corners.

The first turbine engine was installed in the electric plant in 1915. It was custom to run the street lights off during the nights when there was moonlight sufficient to light the way for the people, but in June, 1920, the electric service during the summer months became a day-and-night establishment. It is of interest to note that in 1895, the cost to the Town for street lighting was \$2,400, and twenty-two years later (1917) the cost was \$4,342, with twice as many lights in existence. The first winter day-and-night electric service was inaugurated in 1922 – 1923. In July of the latter year the electric service was extended to Monomy. In 1924 the third turbine was installed in the electric plant.

The records of the Nantucket Company will reveal the transactions in 1932 which led to the placement of the wires underground in Main Street Square, and of Manager William Mather's plan to extend this program. The Main Street lights were also improved at this time.